

Contract No.: 282-98-0023
MPR Reference No.: 8762-201

MATHEMATICA
Policy Research, Inc.

**Implementing Welfare-
to-Work Programs in
Rural Places:
Lessons from the Rural
Welfare-to-Work
Strategies Demonstration
Evaluation**

Final Report

April 6, 2004

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Submitted to:

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to the Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation and the preparation of this report. The authors are especially grateful for the time and insights of staff from the state departments of human services and the demonstration programs in each of the evaluation sites. The evaluation would not be possible without their ongoing cooperation, and this report benefited from their thoughtful responses to the many questions we posed in site visit interviews.

In particular, we would like to thank David Gruenenfelder, Marilyn Okon, Jane Radliff, Alan Summers, Paul Howell, and Patricia Berndt from the Illinois Department of Human Services; Marv Kanne, Marian Angelo, Trish Bergman, and Dennis Ellis from the Nebraska Health and Human Services System; and Sherri Carroll, Kerry Mullens, Penny Smith, and Susan Cowden from the Tennessee Department of Human Services. We also extend our appreciation to the many regional administrators, local office managers and supervisors, and caseworkers who took time out of their schedules to meet with us.

Leaders and staff members of the three demonstration programs made significant contributions to this research. We would like express special appreciation to Tim Bellamey and Kim Guetersloh from Shawnee Community College and Illinois Future Steps, Beth Birnstihl, Marilyn Fox, and Carol Thayer from the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension and Building Nebraska Families, and Charles Ellis and Charlene Shelton from the Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council and Tennessee First Wheels. We learned a great deal about the operation of the demonstration programs and strategies for delivering services in rural areas from Future Steps career specialists, Building Nebraska Families educators, and First Wheels program managers.

We wish to acknowledge the program clients who participated in focus groups during our site visits. The experiences and opinions they shared enhanced our understanding of the demonstration programs and the rural context considerably.

In addition, would like to thank Michael Dubinsky, Karl Koerper, Naomi Goldstein, and Howard Rolston, at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

Administration for Children and Families, for continued support of the evaluation and helpful feedback on an earlier draft of the report.

Many staff at Mathematica Policy Research played important roles in the preparation of this report. Michael Ponza provided invaluable guidance as project director, and Alan Hershey offered expert advice on the report's structure and content. Shawn Marsh and Jason Markesich coordinated the recruitment of focus group participants and conducted the focus groups with sensitivity and skill. Angela Richardson and Jennifer Faerber adeptly programmed our analysis of management information system data. Patricia Ciaccio and Laura Berenson carefully edited the report, and Jill Miller provided excellent formatting and production support.

The authors sincerely appreciate these many contributions and accept sole responsibility for any errors or omissions in the report.

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IMPLEMENTING WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS IN RURAL PLACES: KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS

The Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies (RWtW) Demonstration Evaluation is assessing whether innovative programs can improve employment and other outcomes for rural low-income people. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and its subcontractors, Decision Information Resources and the Rural Policy Research Institute, are conducting the evaluation with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. This report chronicles the implementation experiences of three programs:

- *Illinois Future Steps*, which offered intensive, employment-focused case management to prepare participants for work and to help them find and keep good jobs.
- *Building Nebraska Families (BNF)*, which provides preemployment education to improve the basic life skills of hard-to-employ people so they can engage in job search and training activities and address personal and family barriers to self-sufficiency.
- *Tennessee First Wheels*, which offers no-interest car loans to low-income families who need transportation to get to work and improve their quality of life.

The findings and lessons on the implementation of the RWtW demonstration programs focus primarily on program development and client experiences; institutional partnerships and local connections; and outreach, staffing, and management.

KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, the RWtW programs' implementation has conformed to their models. The programs all developed and benefited from earlier pilot projects that were refined by state welfare agencies and their partner organizations.
- Program staff members, especially in Future Steps and BNF, help clients address a range of specific issues and employment barriers. To varying extents, they also identify and refer clients to various outside service providers, resources, and potential employers.
- Although clients' employment cannot necessarily be attributed to their participation in the demonstration programs, program records suggest that many participants in Future Steps and BNF do have some success in securing jobs. (Most First Wheels clients must already be employed to qualify for a loan.)

- Independent partner organizations bring the advantages of location, reputation, and staff expertise to their programs. Previous collaboration experience between the state welfare agencies and their partners helped smooth program startup and operation in Illinois and Nebraska.
- Future Steps and BNF served at least as many clients as planned. First Wheels has had difficulty reaching its goals, largely because of competing priorities in local offices and insufficient coordination on outreach between the state welfare agency and its partner organization.
- Program staff members typically work in locations distant from program administrators and exercise substantial discretion and autonomy in their daily work. The programs have sometimes found it challenging to identify and hire people who have the combination of desired staff qualifications and who are familiar with the rural communities the programs serve.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Welfare-to-work programs may be most valuable for rural clients when they both focus on improving employment prospects and provide assistance on a range of other issues. In rural places where fewer service providers exist, clients appear more likely to turn to welfare-to-work program staff for many kinds of help.
- Program staff can address rural challenges related to clients' poor personal reputations by vouching for them with potential employers and other service providers. Having a staff member act as a reference is of special value to clients in tight-knit rural communities, where a poor personal or family reputation can negatively affect a person's economic prospects.
- Partner organizations offer advantages—location and reputation—that have particular significance in rural areas. The partners' physical presence promotes outreach and provide service delivery over a wide territory. As locally-recognized institutions, their involvement may also help generate support for a program from employers and lessen the strong stigma often attached to welfare programs in rural areas.
- Outreach must be aggressive to reach potential clients in rural places. Clear incentives and strong coordination between a welfare agency and its partner organization promote successful recruitment.
- Operating programs in large, sparsely populated service areas requires independent staff members who are familiar with their communities. Program leaders must be prepared to actively support staff members and monitor their work from a distance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural low-income families trying to find jobs, maintain employment, and secure longer-term well-being face distinct challenges. In rural labor markets, jobs tend to be scarcer than in urban ones, and the jobs that are available more often involve minimum-wage or part-time work. Education and training opportunities and such support services as health and mental health care also are more likely to be difficult to obtain. Moreover, lack of public transportation common in rural areas can make existing jobs and services difficult for a dispersed population to access.

This report chronicles the implementation experiences of the three demonstration programs participating in the Rural Welfare-to-Work (RWtW) Strategies Demonstration Evaluation. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) and its subcontractors, Decision Information Resources and the Rural Policy Research Institute, are conducting the evaluation with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Although it does not present findings on the impact of the demonstration programs—impact and cost-benefit research is still in progress—the report does share an early assessment of how the programs operate and the successes and challenges they have encountered so far. Researchers gathered information for the process and implementation study through in-depth site visits to each program (conducted between February 2002 and August 2003) and management information systems (MIS).

THE RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK DEMONSTRATION PROGRAMS

The RWtW demonstration programs use diverse approaches to address employment barriers common in rural places (key features of the programs are summarized in Table 1). They include:

- ***Illinois Future Steps***, which offered intensive, employment-focused case management to prepare participants for work and to help them find and keep good jobs.
- ***Building Nebraska Families (BNF)***, which provides preemployment education intended to improve the basic life skills of hard-to-employ people so they can engage in job search and training activities and address personal and family barriers to self sufficiency.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of the Rural Welfare-to-Work Demonstration Programs

Illinois Future Steps	Building Nebraska Families	Tennessee First Wheels
Program Model		
Employment-focused case management including job placement assistance and postemployment support	Preemployment life skills education	Interest-free car loans with ongoing support for car and loan maintenance
Notable Program Features		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to \$500 in flexible supportive service payments. Staff is co-located in local welfare agency offices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services provided mainly through home visits. “Success markers” track participants’ progress. Master’s-level professional educators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classes on household financial management and vehicle maintenance are required for application. Program arranges access to reliable and affordable used cars.
Partner Organizations		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Illinois Department of Human Services Shawnee Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nebraska Health and Human Services System University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tennessee Department of Human Services Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council
Target Population		
TANF recipients required to work and other low-income volunteers (mainly food stamp or Medicaid recipients)	Hard-to-employ TANF recipients unsuccessful in other activities	Employed current and former TANF recipients and employed recipients of food stamps or child care subsidies
Key Staff		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 career specialists Program coordinator and SCC placement center director 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 extension educators Program coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 program managers Program director

- *Tennessee First Wheels*, which offers no-interest car loans to low-income families who need transportation to get to work and improve their quality of life.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES OF THE RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

The demonstration programs implemented many elements of their program models successfully. All three programs provide the core services stipulated in their designs, and the characteristics of clients who actually enroll in the programs appear to match the populations targeted. The programs also have been able to find and hire the number of employees they projected. Staff turnover has occurred in each program, temporarily affecting operations but not interrupting services substantially.

Although most services are delivered as intended, some elements of the program models materialized only partially or not at all. These elements were secondary services or activities—job training for Future Steps clients, tailored to the needs of local employers; volunteer placements for BNF clients; and reporting of First Wheels clients’ successful payment histories to credit bureaus, so that the clients might start positive credit records.

Future Steps and BNF have served the number of rural clients planned, but First Wheels has not been able to accomplish this goal. Several factors appear to have hindered enrollment into First Wheels. First, state and regional staff did not issue consistent and strong directives to identify and recruit clients for the program. Administrators and line staff in many local offices face competing priorities, and without encouragement from state officials, other activities have taken precedence at the local level. In general, program outreach responsibilities are not clearly allocated between the state welfare agency and its partner organization, and the two entities have had difficulty developing a coordinated outreach strategy. In addition, some caseworkers perceive the First Wheels application, which involves several steps, to be burdensome. To streamline the First Wheels application process, some offices have designated a First Wheels specialist, whose responsibilities include managing program applications. Most offices have not reorganized staff this way, however. Finally, identifying potential First Wheels participants may be challenging because of relatively strict eligibility requirements: most clients must secure and retain employment in order to apply for a loan.

Clients of the demonstration programs receive services that address a wide range of specific issues and employment barriers. For example, Future Steps career specialists provide employment-related services, including job search and placement assistance, to nearly all clients, but also counsel clients on a variety of other topics, most commonly, transportation, family issues, and child care. Similarly, BNF educators cover a variety of issues during their lessons with clients. Large proportions of BNF clients have studied such diverse topics as parenting, problem solving, goal setting, and stress management. The programs range in the intensity and personalization of their services. First Wheels program managers must work closely with some clients to ensure that clients make regular and timely loan payments. In contrast, Future Steps and BNF generally entail more concentrated and frequent interaction with clients. The relatively small caseloads that Future Steps and BNF staff carry make it easy for clients to participate intensively.

Most clients who participated in focus groups felt that the programs’ services have been valuable. In addition to mentioning the tangible benefits of program participation, these clients reported that the programs helped improve their outlook and motivation to gain employment. Many Future Steps and BNF clients enter paid employment, although this outcome cannot necessarily be attributed to program participation. (Most First Wheels clients must be employed to qualify for a loan.) MIS records and staff reports indicate that about two-thirds of Future Steps clients became employed at least once after entering the program, and that about 45 percent of BNF clients have been able to maintain employment for at least one month.

MEETING RURAL CHALLENGES THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

Institutional partnerships and active connections with local employers and other service providers are among the strategies that the programs use to meet the demands of rural program implementation. State welfare agencies in all three sites collaborated with well-known, well-respected partner organizations to deliver the demonstration programs. The positive reputations of partner organizations helps reduce any stigma that clients may feel as participants in a welfare-to-work program. Institutional partners also provide an infrastructure that helps extend services to rural areas. For example, the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension has offices in nearly all counties in the state.

The demonstration programs link with other service providers to help clients access the assistance they may need to move toward self sufficiency. Clients benefit from these connections not only by receiving referrals to outside services, but also by having the endorsement of program staff as they interact with employers and other members of the community. Future Steps program records indicate that more than two-fifths of the program's clients were referred to another provider at least once, often for training or education. About two-thirds of BNF clients received some type of noneducational support, including referrals to mental health providers and other sources of assistance. Many First Wheels clients benefit from the program's links with vehicle suppliers, insurance providers, and mechanics.

DELIVERING SERVICES IN DISPERSED AREAS: PROGRAM OUTREACH, STAFFING, AND MANAGEMENT

It appears that the demonstration programs are most likely to achieve a steady flow of new clients if both welfare agency caseworkers and program staff members take active roles in recruiting throughout the service area. Clear incentives and alignment between welfare agency and program goals also promote active recruitment. For example, because BNF is paid a fixed amount per client per month, BNF administrators have a strong financial incentive to ensure that educators have full caseloads. If welfare agency staff believe that a program's services will help clients accomplish key goals, they are more likely to make a referral. Future Steps' focus on rapid employment made the program an appealing referral opportunity to caseworkers from the Illinois Department of Human Services, for instance, because agency performance standards emphasized work activities for clients. In contrast, some caseworkers in Tennessee expressed the opinion that First Wheels services are less helpful because they are restricted to clients who already have jobs.

Staff of the RWtW initiatives are often based in separate locations from program administrators and exercise substantial discretion and autonomy in their daily work. To work effectively with this level of independence, staff must have a high degree of maturity and professionalism, as well as broad skills. Managers of the demonstration programs use case note reviews and other methods to monitor staff activities. They also support staff and encourage program cohesion by communicating regularly by e-mail and telephone and by holding regular staff meetings.

LESSONS LEARNED

The experiences of the three Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs offer several lessons on program operation in a rural context.

- ***Welfare-to-work programs may be most valuable for rural clients when they both focus on improving employment prospects and provide assistance on a range of other issues.*** Although each demonstration program has an area of specialization, staff members of all three programs often address a wide variety of personal and logistical issues as they help clients. This wide-ranging, individualized assistance may be especially important in rural places where few service providers operate.
- ***Program staff can help to overcome rural challenges related to clients' poor personal reputations by vouching for them with potential employers and other service providers.*** As staff of the demonstration programs help clients identify, and take advantage of, available job opportunities and services, they also serve as personal references. Their backing has special value in tight-knit rural communities, in which a poor personal or family reputation can negatively affect a person's economic prospects. The support may persuade employers to offer clients jobs and can facilitate clients' interactions with other service providers.
- ***Partner organizations in the demonstration programs offer the advantages of location and reputation, which have particular significance in rural areas.*** The partners' physical presence and history of working in rural communities enhance efforts to conduct outreach and provide welfare-to-work services in these places. As locally recognized institutions, their involvement may help generate support for a program and reduce the strong stigma often attached to welfare programs in rural areas.
- ***Outreach must be aggressive to reach potential clients in rural places. Clear incentives and strong coordination between a welfare agency and its partner organization promote successful recruitment.*** Rural welfare-to-work programs face a significant challenge in recruiting clients from a dispersed population of potentially eligible people. Outreach to rural clients appears to be most successful when both the welfare agency and its partner organization participate actively. For welfare agency caseworkers, a clear understanding that the program will help clients accomplish key goals is an important factor in referral decisions. Linking compensation for services to enrollment appears to be an effective incentive for partner organizations to actively pursue referrals.

- ***Operating programs in large, sparsely populated service areas requires independent staff members who are familiar with their communities. Program leaders must be prepared to actively support staff members and monitor their work from a distance.*** Because staff members of rural welfare-to-work programs often work far from their managers, they must be able to independently manage their day-to-day activities and tap into local resources. Active managerial support, through frequent communication and other monitoring tools, is critical for creating staff cohesion and for ensuring that programs are implemented consistently across large service areas.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rural low-income families trying to achieve economic independence face distinct challenges. Low-income people in both rural and urban places may encounter such barriers to employment as limited job skills or inadequate child care. Economic and geographic conditions in many rural areas, however, create special hurdles for welfare recipients and other disadvantaged people hoping to find jobs, maintain employment, and secure longer-term well-being. In rural labor markets, jobs tend to be scarcer than in urban ones, and the jobs that are available more often involve minimum-wage or part-time work. Education and training opportunities and such support services as health and mental health care also are more likely to be difficult to obtain. Moreover, lack of public transportation common in rural areas can make existing jobs and services difficult for a dispersed population to access (Weber and Duncan 2001; and Friedman 2003).

In the context of welfare reform, understanding how to address these challenges and help rural low-income families move toward self-sufficiency is particularly important. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, established under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, imposes work requirements and a five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance for most recipients. These rules create a new impetus for welfare recipients to find jobs—regardless of where they live. Some states and localities, recognizing the particular challenges facing the rural poor, have launched welfare-to-work programs specifically targeting rural places. The Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation will assess whether three innovative programs in Illinois, Nebraska, and Tennessee can improve employment and other outcomes for rural low-income people (see text box). Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) and its subcontractors, Decision Information Resources and the Rural Policy Research Institute, are conducting the evaluation with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

This report chronicles the implementation experiences of the three programs participating in the Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation. Although it does not present findings on the impact of the demonstration programs—impact and cost-benefit research is still in progress—the report does share an early assessment of how the programs operate and the successes and challenges they have encountered so far. We

THE RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK STRATEGIES DEMONSTRATION EVALUATION

The Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation is the first rigorous, systematic evaluation of programs designed to move more rural families from welfare to work and to promote sustained employment and job progression. The evaluation includes the following complementary studies:

- ***Impact Study.*** A random-assignment design will allow evaluators to determine what difference the demonstration programs make in clients' employment, family functioning, and longer-term well-being. Individuals eligible for program slots are being assigned to either a program group (who are offered services) or a control group (who are not offered demonstration program services but who may use all other available services). The behaviors and outcomes of these two groups will be compared over time to determine each program's net impacts.
- ***Cost-Benefit Study.*** The evaluation will calculate estimates of net program cost-effectiveness based on data from the impact and implementation studies and published research. The distribution of benefits and costs will be analyzed from various perspectives—participant, government, and society at large.
- ***Process and Implementation Study.*** Evaluators will examine the context and operation of the three programs through site visits, program records, and client focus groups. This study will identify important implementation issues, provide details on how programs achieve observed results, and draw lessons about service delivery challenges and innovations.

The Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation began in 2000 and is expected to extend through 2007.

begin by considering how a rural context might affect the implementation of welfare-to-work initiatives and by describing key features of the demonstration programs and the communities in which they operate. We then present early findings on the operation of the demonstration programs, the services they provide, and how clients participate in them. We also explore the service delivery strategies programs use to meet the implementation challenges a rural context presents. We conclude the report by drawing early lessons about the design and operation of welfare-to-work programs in rural places, with the goal of informing other efforts to promote economic independence among rural low-income families.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES FOR RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

The same conditions that affect rural low-income people's ability to move toward self-sufficiency also have implications for how welfare-to-work programs in rural areas operate. The following rural characteristics are likely to have some bearing on program design and implementation:

- ***Limited Job Opportunities and Service Capacity.*** Rural areas with relatively few employers and a small number of social service providers offer scarce external resources for welfare-to-work programs. To adequately help clients, programs may need to find opportunities and useful outside services that do exist or provide a wide range of services themselves.
- ***Population Dispersion.*** Rural areas are defined by low population density, and clients of a rural welfare-to-work program are likely to live across a wide geographic region. This dispersion may affect the size of a program's service areas, how it recruits and enrolls participants, where staff members are located, and how they are managed.
- ***Compact Social Networks.*** Tight-knit rural communities present both advantages and disadvantages for low-income people. While the informal support of other community members may be a benefit, an individual's poor personal or family reputation can negatively affect economic prospects by making local employers less willing to hire that person (Findeis et al. 2001). Rural welfare-to-work programs may have a role in helping clients overcome this barrier.

This report builds on existing knowledge about the implementation of welfare-to-work programs by exploring the significance of rural conditions. An earlier process study of welfare-to-work programs, evaluating grants administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, identified several general lessons on program operation (Nightingale et al. 2002). It highlighted the benefits of local partnerships and collaborations, which enhance the services a program provides, as well as the importance of systematically recruiting clients to keep adequate enrollment levels. Partnerships and active client outreach are central elements of the three Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs, as this report describes, but a rural context shapes how these program components function.

THE RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK DEMONSTRATION PROGRAMS

The Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs use diverse approaches to address employment barriers common in rural places. The three programs—Illinois Future Steps, Building Nebraska Families, and Tennessee First Wheels—were selected as evaluation sites because they offer innovative services on a scale large enough to support a rigorous

experimental study of impacts. We summarize key features of the programs here and in Table I.1. Appendix A includes a profile of each program.

Illinois Future Steps. The Future Steps program responded to the scarcity of job opportunities in rural areas by offering intensive, employment-focused case management to prepare participants for work and help them find and keep good jobs. Career specialists assessed clients' skills and interests and helped them overcome personal and logistical barriers to employment. The career specialists worked with clients to create individualized job search and skills enhancement plans, and helped them, as necessary, obtain and keep a job. In addition to mentoring clients and making outside referrals, career specialists could authorize up to \$500 in flexible supportive service payments to help clients meet a variety of employment-related and personal expenses—from transportation to utility bills. Future Steps operated from July 2001 through June 2003, enrolling TANF clients who were required to work and low-income people who volunteered to participate (mainly recipients of food stamps or Medicaid).

Staff of Shawnee Community College (SCC), based in Ullin, Illinois, ran Future Steps under a contract with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). The program's staff included five career specialists, a program coordinator, and the director of the SCC placement center, which provides job search services to students and the general public. To make it easier for career specialists to reach clients and coordinate with IDHS caseworkers and administrators, the specialists were stationed in local IDHS offices.

The Future Steps service area covered five rural counties in southern Illinois. The counties have a combined population of about 64,000; most residents are white, but a substantial minority—about 13 percent—are African American. All five counties face economic challenges, including poverty rates above the statewide average (as high as 26 percent in one county) and limited public transportation. The area has a few large employers, including chemical and cement factories, state prisons, and a riverboat casino. However, common entry-level jobs are with retailers, fast-food restaurants, and nursing homes.

Building Nebraska Families. Building Nebraska Families (BNF) takes an indirect approach to helping low-income people move from welfare to work. This preemployment educational program aims to improve the basic life skills of hard-to-employ people so they can engage in job search and training activities and address personal and family barriers to self-sufficiency. BNF educators work individually with participants, using research-based curricula to teach subjects that range from household management and parenting to decision making and building self-esteem. Education sessions typically take place in participants' homes, and participants' progress is tracked through "success markers," which specify behaviors the program seeks to encourage. The program's approach recognizes that many individuals face multiple, serious personal barriers to employment and that specialized services to address these barriers often are limited or difficult to access in rural areas. BNF is the only demonstration program that enrolls TANF clients exclusively. The program began in February 1999 and became a Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration site in April 2002.

Table I.1: Key Characteristics of the Rural Welfare-to-Work Demonstration Programs

Illinois Future Steps	Building Nebraska Families	Tennessee First Wheels
Program Model		
Employment-focused case management including job placement assistance and postemployment support	Preemployment life skills education	Interest-free car loans with ongoing support for car and loan maintenance
Notable Program Features		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to \$500 in flexible supportive service payments. Staff is co-located in local welfare agency offices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services provided mainly through home visits. "Success markers" track participants' progress. Master's-level professional educators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classes on household financial management and vehicle maintenance are required for application. Program arranges access to reliable and affordable used cars.
Partner Organizations		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Illinois Department of Human Services Shawnee Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nebraska Health and Human Services System University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tennessee Department of Human Services Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council
Target Population		
TANF recipients required to work and other low-income volunteers (mainly food stamp or Medicaid recipients)	Hard-to-employ TANF recipients unsuccessful in other activities	Employed current and former TANF recipients and employed recipients of food stamps or child care subsidies
Service Area		
5 rural counties in southern Illinois	52 rural counties located throughout the state	Statewide (only rural counties included in the evaluation)
Key Staff		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 career specialists Program coordinator and SCC placement center director 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 extension educators Program coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 program managers Program director
Approximate Caseload Size		
15-35 clients per career specialist	10-20 clients per educator	45-105 clients per program manager
Evaluation Sample Size		
630 total (313 program, 317 control)	600 projected (330 program, 270 control)	n.a.
Sample Intake Period		
July 2001 – December 2002	March 2002 – August 2004	n.a.

n.a. = not applicable. (Tennessee will not participate in the evaluation's impact or cost-benefit studies.)

The University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension (UNCE) operates BNF with funding from the Nebraska Health and Human Services System. Ten BNF educators are based in UNCE offices throughout Nebraska, and each covers a service area of three to eight rural counties. All educators and the program coordinator have master's degrees.

The 52 counties in BNF's service area vary in population density—the counties include not only remote, sparsely populated areas, but also such large towns as North Platte and Grand Island. However, most of the counties have the tenuous economic conditions common in rural areas. Although Nebraska's rural areas are largely homogeneous—nearly all residents are white—some communities have experienced a recent influx of refugees, other immigrants, and migrant workers. Nebraska as a whole has enjoyed relatively low unemployment and poverty. In most of the counties BNF serves, however, poverty and unemployment figures are above the statewide average. A recent survey of Nebraska TANF clients indicates that most employed clients work in service jobs (such as positions in the health or food sectors) or hold clerical or other administrative support positions. Urban TANF clients in Nebraska hold better jobs, in terms of pay and benefits, than rural clients, on average (Ponza et al. 2002).

Tennessee First Wheels. First Wheels offers no-interest car loans to address the lack of reliable, affordable transportation—a key barrier to work and self-sufficiency among rural low-income families. The program not only provides funding to help Tennessee families purchase vehicles but also allows loan recipients access to a supply of well-maintained used cars, works with clients to create a reasonable repayment schedule, and, ideally, presents an opportunity for clients to develop a good credit history. To apply for a loan, clients document their ability to make regular loan payments and appear before a loan committee made up of local welfare agency administrators and community volunteers. After a loan is approved, First Wheels program managers help clients select and purchase a vehicle and access related services, such as affordable car insurance. Program managers ensure that clients make regular payments on their loans, monitor clients' maintenance of their cars, and, if necessary, help them identify dependable local mechanics. The program's eligible population includes current and former TANF recipients and employed recipients of food stamps or child care subsidies.

The Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) runs First Wheels in collaboration with the Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D), an organization that promotes rural development. TDHS coordinates the loan application process, while RC&D purchases vehicles and manages individual loans under a contract with TDHS. The First Wheels staff includes a program director and four to six program managers, each of whom covers a territory of roughly 10 to 20 counties.

First Wheels is available to clients throughout Tennessee. As in Nebraska, Tennessee's rural areas are diverse, but unemployment and poverty rates tend to be higher for nonmetropolitan areas than statewide. Regional geography, such as mountains in the eastern part of the state, may affect the degree of isolation that residents experience, as well as their ability to access services or commute to work easily. Public transportation in most rural

places is limited to paratransit services—vans that mostly serve clients with medical needs—and taxicabs in some rural population centers.

Tennessee First Wheels participated only in the process and implementation study component of the Rural Welfare-to-Work evaluation. It will not be possible to complete impact and cost-benefit studies of the program due to limited enrollment.

IMPLEMENTATION STUDY RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The goal of the Rural Welfare-to-Work Evaluation’s process and implementation study is to provide a detailed view into the development and operation of each of the three demonstration programs. The study seeks not only to document each program’s model and service delivery strategies, but also to provide a context for the evaluation’s impact and cost-benefit findings. The implementation research focuses on the following questions:

- ***How closely does the programs’ implementation follow their design?*** What are the key components of the programs’ models, and how were they developed? What services do clients actually receive, and how intensively do they participate in the program?
- ***How do the programs address rural barriers to self-sufficiency?*** What program services appear to be especially valuable or innovative? How have the programs tailored their services to the needs of rural clients?
- ***What factors promote effective service delivery and program management in rural areas?*** What methods are used to recruit and enroll clients into the program? How are staff recruited, trained, and supervised? What role does collaboration across partner organizations play, and how is it accomplished?
- ***What are the implications for other rural welfare-to-work programs?*** How could the demonstration programs be improved? Do the experiences of the Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs offer operational lessons for initiatives in other places?

To explore these questions, this report relies primarily on information collected through in-depth site visits to each program and management information systems (MIS). Teams of two researchers made two site visits each to the Illinois Future Steps and BNF programs and one visit to the Tennessee First Wheels program. All visits included in-depth, semistructured interviews with a variety of respondents—program directors, line staff, state and local human services agency administrators and caseworkers, and representatives from community organizations that collaborate with the demonstration programs. The researchers also observed program activities, such as meetings between staff and clients, and reviewed the case histories of a sample of program participants. Finally, the researchers conducted focus groups with program participants and members of the evaluation’s control

group to gather information on program experiences, awareness of service availability, and participants' perceptions of the program's helpfulness.

Additional information on client participation and program services comes from MIS that program staff maintain. MPR created customized systems for the Future Steps and BNF programs and gathered basic data on First Wheels loans from existing program records. The Future Steps and BNF information systems accommodate record-keeping tasks staff members regularly perform, such as documenting topics discussed in client meetings and services provided to clients. The systems also provide data on how frequently clients meet with staff and how long they participate in the programs, along with basic indicators of employment experiences. Because MIS data referenced in this report were captured before program enrollment concluded, the results presented are an interim analysis and do not reflect the experience of the evaluation's entire treatment group. They do, however, offer a useful indication of clients' experiences to date.

CHAPTER II

KEY IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES OF THE RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

The Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs represent three distinct models to help clients move toward self-sufficiency. Illinois Future Steps is structured to help clients secure jobs relatively quickly and then stay employed, while BNF takes a longer-term, educational approach, emphasizing improved life skills rather than immediate employment. Tennessee First Wheels focuses on removing a single barrier to employment—inadequate transportation—by offering qualified clients the opportunity to purchase an automobile and the support they may need to keep this valuable asset.

In this chapter, we explore how these models for the demonstration programs developed and how closely the programs' implementation has conformed to these models. We also describe key aspects of clients' participation in the programs—the kinds of services they receive, how long and intensively they participate, and what difference the programs may have begun to make in their lives.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING PROGRAM MODELS

A first step in understanding the operation of the Rural Welfare-to-Work programs is learning how the programs came into being and assessing whether their overall implementation has followed program designers' plans. It is also useful to recognize aspects of the programs that have not developed as intended and to explore why this occurred.

- *Models for the Rural Welfare-to-Work programs developed from pilot projects refined by the welfare agency and partner organizations.*

All the demonstration programs were modeled on previous initiatives of the welfare agencies or their partner organizations. In Illinois, Advancing Opportunities, which was an employment program that several community colleges in the state offered, was a precursor to Future Steps. When state funding for Advancing Opportunities was cut, SCC and local administrators from IDHS created Future Steps by modifying the earlier program to make it suitable for other sources of support. Key changes for Future Steps included a greater

emphasis on rapid employment, expansion of the eligible client population, and a lower cap—but increased flexibility—for supportive service payments.

Similarly, BNF emerged from a prior collaboration between UNCE and the Nebraska Health and Human Services System (NHHS). In designing BNF, the two entities built on a model from UNCE's Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP), which provides home-based, one-on-one tutoring on healthy eating habits to resource-limited families referred by NHHS. Administrators from the two organizations recognized a gap in services for hard-to-employ TANF recipients in rural areas and believed a similar educational approach could benefit them. The range and intensity of services anticipated for BNF prompted an important adjustment to the FSNEP model: BNF educators must have master's degrees, while FSNEP staff are bachelor's-level paraprofessionals.

TDHS expanded First Wheels from a program operated by a single county to a statewide service, believing that it could benefit low-income clients widely. The expansion of the program's scope prompted significant adjustments to several elements of the program's design. Administrators created more stringent eligibility criteria, including a clean driving record and, for most clients, a record of employment. These criteria are intended to reduce the risks that vehicles will be damaged and that loans that are unlikely to be repaid will be issued. The employment requirement presents a tradeoff, however, as clients who might need transportation to secure or maintain a job often are not eligible to apply for a First Wheels loan.

The expansion also required TDHS to identify an organization that could act as fiscal agent and outreach partner for the program throughout the state. Although TDHS and the Tennessee RC&D had not collaborated previously, a regional RC&D council had worked on the county-operated version of First Wheels. Therefore, it seemed natural for TDHS to tap the state RC&D as a partner for the larger program.

- ***Overall, the programs' implementation conforms to their models. Staff turnover and client enrollment have been challenges, but core services continue to be delivered.***

The demonstration programs implemented many elements of their program models successfully. All three programs have provided the core services stipulated in their design: job search assistance and postemployment followup (Illinois), one-on-one life skills education (Nebraska), or car loans and ownership support (Tennessee). The programs also have been able to find and hire the number of employees they projected. In addition, characteristics of clients who actually enroll in the programs appear to match the populations targeted.

During the evaluation staff turnover has occurred in each program, temporarily affecting operations but not interrupting services substantially. For example, the SCC placement center director, Future Steps program coordinator, and several career specialists left Future Steps before the program concluded. Although replacements were found for some of these employees, the overall size of the program staff dropped, individual caseloads

grew, and management support diminished somewhat toward the end of the demonstration period. BNF had no staff turnover for the first year of the evaluation period, but a few educators have left the program since. These departures have required the program coordinator to reassign some service areas and temporarily postpone future referrals until new educators are hired.

Two of the three programs—Future Steps and BNF—have served at least as many clients as planned. Future Steps enrolled a total of 313 people during its two years of operation, exceeding the program’s goal of 300 clients. BNF served more than 240 clients between March 2002 and September 2003, a pace that appears consistent with enrollment objectives.

In contrast, First Wheels has had difficulty recruiting the number of clients it expected to serve in rural areas. More than 400 First Wheels loans have been awarded throughout the state since the program’s inception in March 2000. Enrollment in rural areas slowed significantly over time, however; fewer than 30 loans were awarded to rural clients between October 2002 and August 2003, despite expansion of the program’s target population to include recipients of food stamps and child care assistance. Several factors may be responsible for this circumstance: (1) insufficient support for the program from state and regional administrators in the context of competing priorities for welfare agency line staff; (2) an unclear division of outreach responsibilities between TDHS and RC&D; (3) the perception among some TDHS administrators and caseworkers that the First Wheels application process is cumbersome; and (4) a relatively high eligibility threshold of two month’s employment for many clients. (We explore these issues in more detail later in this report.)

- *Each program model included some features—secondary services or activities—whose implementation proved to be unworkable.*

While the demonstration programs have provided most services as planned, some elements of the program models materialized only partially or not at all. These program features were enhancements that became impractical to implement, not core services.

The Future Steps program did not offer clients job training tailored to the needs of local employers, although program planners believed such services would help create links to employers and encourage job retention and advancement. Several factors appear to have contributed to this shortfall. Changes in Future Steps program leadership lowered the emphasis placed on initiating this component of the program, and fiscal pressures at SCC caused administrators to be more conservative with program resources. In addition, difficulty partnering with the local workforce development agency made it hard to structure and promote short-term vocational training opportunities. Finally, a strict work requirement for many TANF clients sometimes prevented them from participating in training.

Designers of BNF thought that some participants would do volunteer work to help them develop the basic life skills necessary for getting and keeping paid jobs. Few participants, however, appear to be interested in, or have time for, volunteer work. BNF

staff members usually respect client preferences in developing individual educational plans and do not force them to participate in volunteer activities.

An innovative, but uncompleted, feature of the First Wheels plan is helping clients improve their credit records by reporting their payment histories to credit bureaus. This service would allow First Wheels clients who successfully paid off their loans to have this positive information reflected in their official credit histories. Program administrators chose not to undertake this task, however, after they discovered that credit bureaus charge substantial fees to receive the information and require that it be communicated in a specialized format. The funds and staff time required for reporting payment histories were thought to outweigh its potential benefit to clients.

CLIENT EXPERIENCES

Clients in the demonstration programs can access a variety of services. Interviews with staff members, client focus groups, and MIS records provide information on the kinds of assistance clients actually receive and how regularly they participate in program activities.¹

- *Clients receive services that address a range of specific issues and employment barriers.*

Although the demonstration programs are not necessarily designed to be “one-stop shops,” staff members do help clients with a variety of issues, especially in Future Steps and BNF. In addition to providing job search services or life skills education, Future Steps and BNF program staff members mentor clients as they help them address barriers to employment. This pattern may be related to the limited services generally available in rural areas—as program staff members work with clients, they take a broad approach to service delivery to fill such gaps.

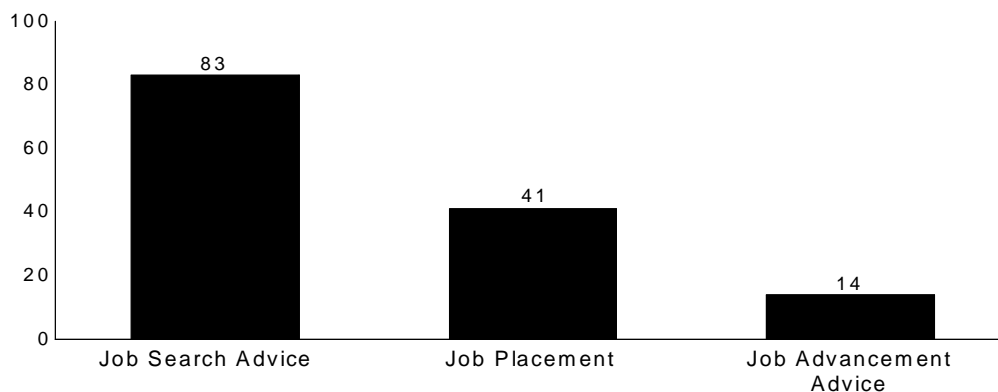
The employment-related assistance that Future Steps provided included job search and job placement activities, along with support for advancement and retention. Most clients—85 percent—received help with employment. As Figure II.1 shows, more than four-fifths had general job search advice sessions with career specialists, often more than once. Smaller proportions received job placement help (41 percent) or job advancement advice (14 percent).

The topics covered in Future Steps staff-client meetings and the purposes of supportive service payments indicate the broad scope of issues beyond employment that career specialists addressed with clients. Figure II.2 shows the proportion of clients who had at

¹For the analysis in this report, Future Steps MIS data covers client participation between July 2001 and February 2003 for those clients who enrolled in August 2002 or earlier (313 total). Building Nebraska Families MIS data covers the period April 2002 through February 2003 for clients who enrolled in November 2002 or earlier (109 total). The analysis includes clients with varying lengths of participation in the programs.

Figure II.1: Future Steps Employment Assistance

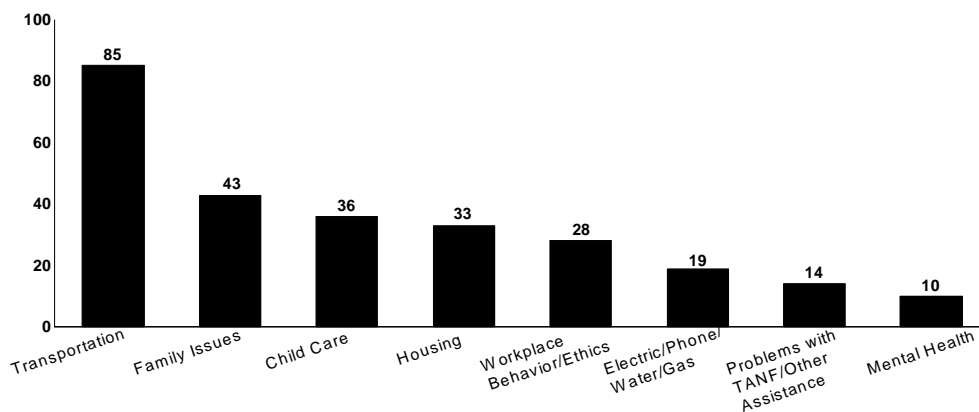
Percentage of Clients that
Received Assistance
at Least Once



Source: Future Steps management information system data.

Figure II.2: Future Steps Personal and Family Assistance^a

Percent of Clients That Had at
Least One Discussion on
Specific Topics



Source: Future Steps management information system data.

^aOnly topics addressed with more than 10 percent of clients are listed. Other topics include parenting, money management, time management, domestic violence, substance/alcohol abuse, and nutrition

least one discussion with Future Steps staff on specific topics. Nearly all clients (85 percent) discussed transportation issues with their Future Steps worker. Many clients also conferred with career specialists on family issues (43 percent), child care (36 percent), housing issues (33 percent), and workplace behavior (28 percent). In addition, while transportation assistance is not a core purpose of Future Steps, more than three-fifths of the program's clients received at least one supportive service payment for transportation. Equipment and clothing purchases were another popular use of supportive service payments—more than a quarter of all clients accessed funds for this reason. Less frequent uses included payments for housing, utilities, and child care.

Similarly, BNF educators cover a range of subjects in the lessons they teach clients. The diversity of lesson topics suggests that clients come to the program with varied needs and that staff members attempt to fulfill a broad educational mission. Parenting is a common lesson topic, as Table II.1 indicates; nearly two-thirds of clients had at least one lesson on this subject. About half of all BNF clients have received lessons on problem solving, goal setting, or personal life skills. Other lesson topics taught to a large share of clients include building self-esteem (43 percent), stress management (37 percent), money management (33 percent), and healthy relationships (31 percent).

Table II.1: Lesson Topics Taught To Building Nebraska Families Clients

Topic	Percent Of Clients That Had At Least One Lesson
Parenting	65
Problem Solving	50
Goal Setting	49
Personal Life Skills	47
Building Self-Esteem	43
Stress Management	37
Money Management	33
Healthy Relationships	31
Time Management	27
Decision-Making	25
Anger Management	24
Coping Skills	23
Child Development	21
Healthy Boundaries	19
Communication Skills	17
Nutrition	11
Household Management	9

Source: Building Nebraska Families management information system data.

Clients affirm that program staff help them address a wide array of issues. One focus group participant, describing meetings with her Future Steps career specialist, noted that discussions cover “child care to car breaking down to if they’re going to bring you to work next week, if you have clothes to wear or...places we’re applying for jobs...just a lot of stuff.”

▪ ***On average, clients participate over an extended period.***

Future Steps and First Wheels clients are connected with these programs for a year or more, while clients of BNF tend to participate for a shorter period. For Future Steps clients, nearly all contacts with program staff take place in the first six months after they enroll. During this period, they are likely to get help looking for work and, if they find employment, to receive support for job retention. After a Future Steps client has found a job and kept it for 90 days, the frequency of contacts drops; career specialists will send letters or make occasional phone calls to let clients know that they can still access Future Steps services, including supportive service payments, if their employment situation changes.

Clients of BNF participate until they “graduate” by meeting goals established when they enter the program (usually employment and increased self-sufficiency), or until they leave for other reasons, such as relocation or insufficient interest in continuing. BNF sets high standards for graduation, given the barriers its client population faces, and the majority of clients do not actually graduate. Those clients who do not reach this milestone may still benefit from participating in the program, however. While some BNF clients stay in the program for a year or longer, five months’ participation is the average for clients in the evaluation sample thus far.

First Wheels clients are considered “active” for the life of their loans, most of which have a term of 30 to 36 months. At any time during this period, program managers may work with clients on such issues as finding a mechanic, making special arrangements for payments, or getting approval for an increase in their loan to pay for needed car repairs.

▪ ***The programs range in the intensity and personalization of their services.***

First Wheels program managers must work closely with some clients to ensure that they make regular and timely loan payments, but Future Steps and BNF generally entail more concentrated and frequent interaction with clients. Because BNF educators usually provide services during home visits, they become familiar with clients’ personal circumstances.

The frequency and duration of contacts between program staff and clients is a useful indicator of the intensity of program services. It also illustrates differences in service delivery between Future Steps and BNF. (Information on staff-client contacts is not available for First Wheels.) Future Steps clients met with career specialists about three times per month, on average, during their first six months in the program. These contacts typically lasted about 15 minutes—enough time for career specialists to briefly discuss job search progress and other issues with clients, offer job leads, and provide a supportive service payment, if needed. Most clients had repeated interaction with the program through

meetings with career specialists or other services. Nearly three-quarters of Future Steps clients had at least 10 program contacts, and more than half had more than 20 contacts.

BNF educators also meet with clients about three times per month but spend more time with clients at each meeting. Nearly all meetings include a lesson covering a specific life skill, which lasts almost an hour, on average. Of clients in the evaluation sample, more than half have received at least 9 hours of education, and nearly one-third have had more than 15 hours. Many clients also receive homework assignments to complete between meetings with an educator.

In both Future Steps and BNF, small caseloads make it easy for clients to participate intensively. Staff members of these programs are responsible for a much smaller number of clients than caseworkers at public welfare agencies. IDHS workers carry caseloads of 200 to 400 clients, while Future Steps workers work with 35 at the most. The contrast is similar in Nebraska, where a caseload of 70 to 100 TANF clients is typical for welfare agency workers in many areas. BNF educators work with an average of just 11 clients at any one time.

▪ ***All the programs have difficulty engaging some clients.***

A minority of clients in each program prove difficult to enroll or unwilling to continue participating. Clients appear to become disengaged more frequently in BNF than in the other two programs, perhaps because of the greater commitment of time the program requires for life skills lessons and personal contact during home visits. In contrast, Future Steps and First Wheels may find it easier to keep clients engaged, given the tangible nature of the benefits they offer—supportive service payments and car loans, respectively.

In Future Steps and First Wheels, the proportion of clients who have little or no contact with the program is relatively small. Future Steps service data indicate that the program was unable to make contact with about 1 out of every 20 clients referred to the program. First Wheels staff members report that they are in touch regularly with most clients whose loans are approved, through letters reminding them of payment and maintenance obligations and other methods. When a client stops “participating” by failing to make payments or respond to contact attempts, the program manager may repossess the client’s car—although this is generally a last resort. The program’s low rate of vehicle repossessions—about nine percent to date—indicates that most clients do fulfill their obligations.

BNF is successful in initially contacting most clients who are referred, but a sizable proportion are difficult to retain over time. Like Future Steps, BNF has little or no contact with about 1 in 20 clients who are referred to the program. Of those clients the program does engage, about one-fifth have had less than three hours of lesson time after at least three months. In addition, educators estimate that one-quarter to one-third of their caseload stops actively participating over the longer term. The intensity of the BNF intervention is one possible reason certain clients find it difficult to remain in the program—the expectation of regular home visits, hourlong sessions with an educator, and homework assignments may be overwhelming for some people. Other clients stop participating for logistical reasons (for example, they move out of the BNF service area).

- ***Clients report that the programs strengthen their motivation and self-confidence and give them a sense of control over their lives.***

Most clients who attended focus groups felt that the demonstration program services are valuable. Clients mentioned not only the tangible benefits of program participation—supportive service payments or a car loan, for example—but also the difference the programs helped make in their outlook and motivation to gain employment.

For clients of Future Steps and BNF, the emotional support that program staff members provide appears to be at least as important as specific services like job search assistance or educational sessions. Although some employed Future Steps clients participating in the focus groups said that the program did not provide a direct lead to their current jobs, they did believe that the encouragement of a career specialist was an important factor in their success. As one client explained, “When you have someone backing you like [the career specialist], you feel like you can do anything....” Another client underscored the positive influence of high standards that career specialists set: “You feel like, ‘If I don’t do it, I’m going to let her down.’ And you don’t want to let her down so you push yourself to do it.” BNF participants report similar improvements in their level of self-assurance: “It’s absolutely been helpful to me,” according to one client who explained, “I think that more than anything, I have somebody to tell me, ‘Yeah, you can do this. And don’t sell yourself short, and don’t give up.’” Program staff members’ involvement in clients’ lives appears to help give them the confidence they need to set goals for themselves and move toward economic independence.

First Wheels clients also say they benefit from an improvement in self-esteem, largely due to the sense of security and dependability they gain from owning a car. Focus group participants described feeling angry, helpless, or depressed because of transportation difficulties before they obtained a car through First Wheels. A First Wheels loan helped lessen these frustrations. “I feel like I’m in control,” said one loan recipient. For another client, the car’s importance was tied to the fact that “it’s the only thing I have ever owned. Ever.” Having a car also helped First Wheels clients become more confident about their employment situations. According to one focus group participant, the best thing about having her own car is “knowing you can get up in the morning and get to work without having to worry if you’re going to make it to work.”

- ***Many Future Steps and BNF clients enter paid employment.***

Future Steps and BNF program records indicate that a substantial number of clients do get paid jobs after they enroll. (Information on the employment history of First Wheels clients is not available, but most must already be employed to qualify for a loan.) Although clients’ employment cannot necessarily be attributed to their participation in the demonstration programs, these findings suggest that participants do have some success in securing jobs.

Among Future Steps clients, two-thirds became employed at least once after entering the program. Job turnover appeared to be common, however. More than one-fifth of

employed clients switched jobs once while in the program, and nearly 3 in 10 had three jobs or more. The average hourly wage for employed clients was just over six dollars. A substantial proportion seemed able keep their jobs for some time; among clients who became employed, more than 40 percent were employed at least 90 days.

Available employment data for BNF clients is less detailed but also indicates that many clients held jobs. Educators submit monthly reports on clients' progress, noting, among other items, whether a client maintained employment "none of the time," "some of the time," or "most of the time" in the prior month. According to these reports, among clients who participated in the program for up to nine months, 45 percent have maintained employment most of the time for one month, and more than a quarter have done so for three or more months (although these months may not be continuous).

CHAPTER III

MEETING RURAL IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

Institutional partnerships and active connections with local employers and other service providers are among the strategies the Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs use to meet the demands of rural program implementation. Partnerships expand the reach and capabilities of the state welfare agencies involved in the programs and enhance the resources available to low-income people in areas with limited service capacity. Community linkages can help clients access existing services, take advantage of employment opportunities, and overcome barriers related to a poor work history or personal reputation. In this chapter, we detail how each demonstration program uses these strategies and highlight their significance in a rural context. We also point out factors that can enhance or reduce the effectiveness of program implementation and service delivery.

LEVERAGING RESOURCES THROUGH PROGRAM PARTNERSHIPS

State welfare agencies in all three Rural Welfare-to-Work sites collaborated with well-known, well-respected partner organizations to implement the demonstration programs. The Illinois Department of Human Services teamed with Shawnee Community College to create Future Steps, the Nebraska Health and Human Services System contracts with the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension to operate Building Nebraska Families, and the Tennessee Department of Human Services runs First Wheels in cooperation with the Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council. Each of the partner agencies has an organizational mission that relates in some way to the demonstration program's objectives (see text box).

PROFILES OF RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK PARTNERS

- ***Shawnee Community College (SCC), Placement Center***, based in Ullin, Illinois, offers associates degrees in a variety of fields and draws students from several surrounding counties. The college's placement center provides job search services to meet the employment needs of students and the general public, as well as employers in the college community and surrounding areas. Services the placement center offers include direct referrals, resume-writing assistance, career/job fairs, career seminars and workshops, on-campus recruitment, career planning, and job advertisements.
- ***University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension (UNCE)*** is the "outreach arm" of the University of Nebraska, providing a network of educators throughout the state to address community needs. UNCE's mission is to help residents enhance their lives through research-based education. UNCE is found throughout the state in 83 county offices that serve all 93 counties.
- ***Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D)*** is a nonprofit organization that promotes the use of natural resources to improve the local environment, economy, and living standards. The Tennessee RC&D consists of 10 community-based regional councils that each cover 5 to 15 counties in the state. The RC&D councils receive some funding and technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but they are guided by the idea that local residents are best able to determine the needs and create solutions for their own communities.

The experiences of the Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs suggest some general lessons regarding the benefits and limitations of these partnerships.

- ***Channeling program services through independent partner organizations has the advantages of location, reputation, and expertise.***

All three collaborating organizations are respected service providers in their regions, and all have infrastructures that benefit the Rural Welfare-to-Work programs. SCC is a primary provider of education and workforce development services in the five-county area it covers. As such, employers are likely to list jobs with the college's placement center, and local residents are familiar with the college's training programs. UNCE maintains offices in nearly all Nebraska counties and extends the university's educational resources to rural areas. The Tennessee RC&D is an umbrella organization for 10 local councils, located throughout Tennessee, that actively promote rural development. Community volunteers direct local RC&D councils—some of these volunteers also serve on First Wheels loan committees.

The positive reputation of partner organizations in the demonstration programs helps reduce the stigma clients may feel as participants in a welfare-to-work program. This is particularly

true of Future Steps and BNF, which have affiliations with well-respected educational institutions. In trying to encourage referred clients to respond to letters to set up an initial appointment, for example, Future Steps workers often emphasized that the program is part of SCC, downplaying its character as a welfare-related service. According to program staff, employers also were more likely to respond to inquiries from Future Steps when they were told of the program's affiliation with the community college.

The organizations that have partnered with welfare agencies for the demonstration programs also possess valuable resources and staff expertise. For example, Future Steps workers have easy access to the extensive job listings that the SCC placement center maintains, along with such other career resources as assessment tools, resume-writing assistance, and career-planning guides. BNF educators have strong credentials as master's-level professionals and benefit from other extension educators' know-how. Materials created by the UNCE community are often included in lessons for BNF clients. In addition, extension educators outside BNF reviewed a curriculum created specifically for the program. The experience and motivation of the demonstration programs' directors is another important source of staff expertise. The First Wheels program director, for example, previously spent more than 30 years at TDHS, working on special projects. Directors of all three programs appeared to be highly motivated and committed to the programs' success.

- ***Previous collaboration experience between welfare agencies and their partners helped smooth program startup and operation in Illinois and Nebraska.***

Two of the partner organizations—SCC and UNCE—have collaborated previously with the welfare agencies in their states. This experience has enhanced the initial and ongoing implementation of the demonstration programs. In Illinois, IDHS had worked with SCC on the Advancing Opportunities program, a predecessor to Future Steps. Former Advancing Opportunities staff members, including the program director, took on similar roles in Future Steps. As a result, when Future Steps began, solid personal relationships among staff at the two agencies already existed, making communication easier about expectations for referrals to Future Steps, service delivery to enrolled clients, and connections with local employers. In Nebraska, NHHS had collaborated with UNCE on the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program; staff at the two agencies modeled BNF on this earlier initiative to some extent. As with Future Steps, the program coordinator for BNF had a leadership role in that previous initiative, so was familiar with NHHS as an institutional partner. This familiarity helped NHHS and UNCE cooperate to address such early implementation issues as where to station BNF educators and how to achieve sufficiently high referral levels.

The institutional partners involved in Tennessee First Wheels had limited prior collaboration experience as a basis for expanding the program statewide. Although a local RC&D council had worked on a county-level version of First Wheels, the statewide implementation of the program marked the first time the Tennessee RC&D council had worked with TDHS. To some extent, this collaboration has operated smoothly. Information about policy and program operations generally appears to flow well between

state-level TDHS and RC&D staff. In addition, in some local areas, TDHS staff and First Wheels program managers effectively work together to recruit clients and enroll them in the program.

The organizations' lack of experience working together may have led to missteps in structuring and implementing their partnership, however. For example, overlapping responsibilities and problems communicating about marketing and outreach tasks have made it challenging for the program to develop a coordinated outreach strategy. This has contributed to lower than expected levels of client recruitment and loan disbursement. In addition, regional RC&D affiliates did not participate as actively in program outreach as planners expected.

- ***Program leaders play an important role in cultivating and maintaining support for the demonstration programs within welfare agencies and partner organizations.***

While the Rural Welfare-to-Work programs have been enhanced by the strengths of the collaborating agencies, they also may be influenced by changes in the program's standing or profile within each organization. Competing priorities can affect how much attention or resources the programs' organizational sponsors devote to them. In Tennessee, for example, TDHS became responsible for determining the eligibility of participants in the state's subsidized health insurance program not long after First Wheels began. This new duty increased the agency's clientele—and workers' caseloads—substantially. Workers had much less time available to identify clients eligible for First Wheels and guide them through the application process.

In general, BNF and Future Steps have benefited from the active backing of their sponsoring organizations, and program leaders have worked to develop and maintain this support. BNF differs from UNCE's traditional activities in that the population served is low-income and the program receives funding through a grant. BNF staff and administrators publicize the program to audiences within and outside the university to generate ongoing interest and explain how it fits into UNCE's larger mission. Similarly, the Future Steps program director helped communicate an ambitious vision for the program to other administrators at the college and the welfare agency. When the director left the program, it lost an important advocate. This departure, and the prospect of an end to demonstration funding, led to a gradual scaling down of the program.

CONNECTING CLIENTS WITH COMMUNITY RESOURCES

All the demonstration programs link with other service providers to achieve program goals and increase client access to the types of assistance they may need to move toward self-sufficiency. Clients benefit from these connections not only through referrals to outside services, but also by having the “endorsement” of program staff as they interact with employers and other members of the community.

- *To varying extents, program staff members identify and refer clients to outside service providers, resources, and potential employers.*

Program staff use both structured and informal scans of their service areas to identify useful outside resources. BNF educators are expected to undertake “community mapping” to catalog other local organizations working with low-income people. In all the programs, staff members’ personal knowledge of their communities also appears to be an important means of locating useful resources. Several Future Steps career specialists were familiar with local services and employers because they had grown up in the counties the program served. Demonstration program staff members also may share information with each other about service providers that can help clients across communities. In First Wheels, program managers in three service areas have worked with a single insurance broker willing to secure automobile policies for loan recipients.

The frequency and types of referrals that staff members make vary across the programs, and referral patterns in each program reflect that program’s overall goals and service emphasis. Program records from Future Steps indicate that more than two-fifths of the program’s clients were referred to another provider at least once, and one-third received three or more referrals. More than 30 percent of clients who received referrals were directed to training or education providers, although not all of them may have actually entered training.¹ Much smaller shares were referred for such services as mental health care (seven percent) or substance abuse treatment (two percent). Future Steps career specialists also linked clients with potential employers by calling employers to make appointments for clients or providing other placement assistance. As noted earlier, about two-fifths of the program’s clients received this kind of help.

BNF educators make referrals to mental health providers and other sources of assistance not directly related to employment, such as community action agencies or parenting groups. This pattern likely reflects the lower level of overall life management skills among BNF participants, compared to those in Future Steps. BNF service records indicate that educators have provided noneducation support—including referrals and contacts with staff at other organizations on clients’ behalf—to about two-thirds of participants. Individual educators vary in how often they provide such support, however. A few educators have provided referrals or contacted outside organizations for nearly all their clients, while others may do so for only a third or fewer of their participants. This variation could be due to differences in how effectively staff members network with outside service providers or in their ability to integrate such referrals with their core responsibilities as educators.

¹ Records indicate that nine percent of Future Steps clients entered training of some type (including GED, occupational training, and on-the-job training).

ACQUIRING CARS FOR FIRST WHEELS CLIENTS

First Wheels program managers try to match clients' needs and circumstances with the type of vehicles they receive. This is not always easy—reliable cars sold for the amount of a typical First Wheels loan (\$2,400 to \$3,100) are scarce.

A key accomplishment for First Wheels has been a legislative measure that secures the program privileged access to used vehicles from the state of Tennessee. When the state government no longer can use a vehicle, it is transferred to a surplus lot. First Wheels has the opportunity to purchase these cars before they are made available to other parties. Used cars purchased through the state usually are in better condition than those available from automobile dealers, since the state requires that they be well maintained, and they are relatively affordable. The program has acquired about 180 vehicles this way.

First Wheels staff connect clients with a supply of reliable used vehicles and other services essential to car ownership. Because of the program's direct relationship with the state of Tennessee, clients can access used state vehicles, which usually are in better condition and more affordable than those available through other sources (see text box). This enables clients to avoid the hassles and risks of purchasing a used car on the open market. As noted earlier, staff members have developed relationships with insurers who can provide affordable coverage. When vehicles need repairs, program staff also may help clients find a qualified, affordable mechanic in their area. Program records do not indicate how many clients receive such assistance, however.

- ***Staff members also help clients overcome poor reputations and navigate the social service system.***

Some clients of the Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs face challenges related to their personal histories. These people may come to the programs with a checkered employment record or troubled family background, information that may be widely known in a tight-knit rural community. Such circumstances can make it more difficult for these clients to find and keep a job.

In these cases, program staff “vouch” for clients—staff express confidence in these clients' abilities and signal that they have the program's backing. For example, Future Steps career specialists would actively market clients as good candidates for available positions, contacting potential employers to tell them to expect an application and informing them that the client was affiliated with SCC. Employers and other service providers who heard these expressions of support may have been more likely to offer clients an opportunity—or a second chance—especially when program staff were known and respected within the community.

When clients have problems with employers or social service providers, program staff members sometimes help resolve these issues. In Future Steps, mediation with employers, although it occurred infrequently, was sometimes critical to job retention. Career specialists noted using this strategy in several instances: to address an accusation that a client had stolen from a customer while on the job, to resolve child care issues, and to discuss a drop in the client's productivity. Program records indicate that staff mediated for just over 1 in 10 clients. About half of these instances were with employers; the rest were with social service agencies and other parties.

BNF educators spend little time interacting with employers, but they do help clients communicate with other parts of the social service system. This assistance may be practical—for example, helping a client complete paperwork for child support payments. It may also be structured as a mentoring experience—coaching a client on making a difficult telephone call to a child's school, for instance. Staff members also have helped clients resolve problems with the local welfare agency. As one focus group participant explained, “Caseworkers, supervisors, counselors—they just...wouldn't listen to us....And so [the BNF educator] helped us...set up a meeting with everybody, and she called us into her office...and we wrote down everything we wanted to say at the meeting.” An educator can make this kind of assistance an educational experience for clients, modeling effective ways of resolving problems as she acts as a liaison between the client and the welfare agency.

CHAPTER IV

DELIVERING SERVICES IN DISPERSED AREAS: PROGRAM OUTREACH, STAFFING, AND MANAGEMENT

Large geographic service areas affect how Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs operate. To maintain adequate enrollment, the programs must extend outreach to eligible clients who may live far from local welfare offices. Staff members must work effectively in locations that often are far from their colleagues and managers. Program leaders must stay apprised of staff activities, and provide support, from a distance. In this chapter, we describe strategies the demonstration programs have used to accomplish these tasks and consider how successfully they have done so.

CONDUCTING OUTREACH TO ELIGIBLE CLIENTS

Outreach for the demonstration programs typically involves identifying low-income people eligible to participate, giving them information about the programs, and meeting with potential clients to secure their participation. Accomplishing each of these steps and involving clients who live in remote areas requires active participation from the welfare agency and its partner organization.

- *Large service areas demand intensive, well-coordinated marketing and outreach efforts.*

The demonstration programs appear most likely to achieve a steady flow of new clients when both welfare agency caseworkers and demonstration program staff members take active roles in recruiting throughout the service area. In all three programs, agency caseworkers are responsible for singling out potential clients, determining their eligibility, and completing the paperwork necessary for a referral. Program staff can contribute to recruitment, however, by ensuring that agency caseworkers know when program caseloads fall and spaces open for new clients. They may also communicate directly with potential clients in their service area to make them aware of the program. BNF educators increased their outreach efforts when they encountered lower than expected referral levels soon after expanding the program. Educators now distribute simple program brochures at welfare offices and other service providers' locations and conduct periodic, one-time life skills

training sessions for interested TANF clients. Educators may also meet personally with people referred to BNF to describe the program's services and benefits.

The quality of relationships between demonstration program and welfare agency staff members appears to affect how broadly outreach occurs. Future Steps career specialists and welfare agency caseworkers were co-located in five IDHS offices, which made ongoing communication and client recruitment throughout the service area easier. Future Steps and IDHS staff in each office reported being in frequent contact about outreach efforts and client status. In Tennessee, First Wheels staff members appear to work more effectively with some welfare offices than others, depending on local administrators' enthusiasm for the program and First Wheels program managers' efforts to encourage their support. Enrollment patterns reflect this local variation, with some Tennessee counties making frequent referrals to the program, while others rarely or never do so.

First Wheels' experience with outreach illustrates the importance of coordinated efforts between the welfare agency and its partner organization. Although TDHS and the Tennessee RC&D have separate program tasks within First Wheels, the two organizations share general responsibility for promoting the program and encouraging clients to apply. Neither organization fully embraced these outreach duties, however, and creating a coordinated strategy has proven to be challenging. This difficulty in allocating responsibility across organizations and synchronizing outreach activities is one factor affecting the program's ability to enroll clients consistently.

- ***Clear incentives and alignment between welfare agency and demonstration program goals promote active recruitment.***

Performance goals or financial incentives can motivate welfare agencies and their partner organizations to conduct aggressive outreach for the demonstration programs, even over a large service area. If welfare agency staff believe that a program's services will help clients accomplish key goals, they are more likely to make a referral. For example, IDHS consistently emphasizes work for TANF clients and tracks the ability of individual offices to engage clients in work activities. Future Steps, with its focus on rapid employment, offered an appealing referral opportunity to caseworkers interested in meeting these standards. NHHS caseworkers see BNF as a way to meet the needs of clients with severe barriers, who can be difficult to serve otherwise.

BNF administrators have a strong financial incentive to ensure that educators have full caseloads. The Nebraska Health and Human Services System compensates UNCE on a case-rate basis for BNF services, paying a fixed amount per client per month. This link to program income encourages staff to respond quickly to declines in enrollment through cooperation with NHHS and increased attention to outreach.

An application process that welfare agency caseworkers feel is burdensome or unreasonably restrictive can act as a disincentive for outreach. Some caseworkers in Tennessee expressed the opinion that the First Wheels application was too time-consuming, since it involved several phases and required such steps as creating a household budget.

Local welfare offices that designated one caseworker assistant as a First Wheels liaison, who would handle all applications to the program, were able to streamline the application process and largely address caseworker concerns. In some offices, First Wheels referrals were also hampered by a belief that few clients could meet the minimum requirements of employment and clean driving records. In this regard, the First Wheels program faced a difficult trade-off, because prior experience had indicated that relaxing eligibility requirements could lead to more loan defaults or damaged cars. Program administrators chose not to take this risk.

STAFFING REMOTE SERVICE AREAS

For all three of the demonstration programs, service quality depends in large measure on staff capabilities. Staff members provide key services—case management, education, and links to job opportunities and other service providers—and generally do so with limited on-site supervision. This circumstance influences the kinds of skills staff should possess and the level of effort involved in finding and hiring qualified people.

- ***Program staff members must function as independent professionals.***

Based in separate locations from program administrators, staff members of the Rural Welfare-to-Work initiatives exercise substantial discretion and autonomy in their daily work. By and large, they independently manage their schedules, conduct client meetings, and decide when to travel to more remote parts of their service areas. Staff members also decide how to prioritize their tasks, and they act as representatives of the program and its sponsoring institution in their local communities. To work effectively with this level of independence, staff must have a high degree of maturity and professionalism, as well as broad skills.

Staff members face service delivery challenges related to the programs' rural environment and must exercise independent good judgment in addressing them. A recurring issue for staff members of BNF and First Wheels, for example, is managing the amount of time they spend traveling to provide services over a large area. Distances between clients or welfare offices vary among individual service areas, so each staff member must decide how to schedule in-person contacts with clients and others to make their travel as efficient as possible. A BNF staff member who does so may still spend as many as 10 hours a week driving to home visit appointments.

Staff members who appear to be most effective not only accomplish core tasks independently, but also possess the skills and take the initiative to develop local connections they need to do their jobs well. Helping link clients with local employers, service providers, and other resources is an important component of the demonstration programs' services, as noted earlier. Program administrators noted that some staff members are especially resourceful in identifying and making the most of existing job opportunities and services in their communities. Because the resources available in each community are different, staff members must be able to develop local connections with limited assistance from program administrators.

- ***Recruiting adequately qualified people in rural areas can be challenging.***

Demonstration programs have sometimes found it difficult to identify and hire people who have the combination of qualifications desirable for staff. At a minimum, candidates are expected to have relevant work experience and strong interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills. They also need the maturity necessary to work with autonomy and, ideally, familiarity with the communities in which they are posted. Job applicants with such skills and characteristics may be scarce in rural areas. BNF staff members must also have a master's degree, a requirement for all UNCE educators, and this adds to the staff recruitment challenge the program faces. In contrast, neither Future Steps nor First Wheels requires line staff to have college degrees, although many staff members have completed some undergraduate education.

Staff training is one way to enhance the skills of available job candidates, and the demonstration programs provide varying levels of this support to staff. The BNF program coordinator trains new educators on the program's curriculum, performance-monitoring tools, home-visiting strategies, identification of community resources, and confidentiality issues. This instruction is reinforced at regular staff meetings. In addition, educators can participate in trainings with welfare agency caseworkers on such topics as wraparound service delivery. Initial training for new staff of Future Steps usually involved a single session to review policy, procedures, and program goals, followed by temporary on-site supervision by a fellow staff member. Future Steps administrators acknowledged that this preparation was somewhat limited and noted that offering more comprehensive training for new career specialists could have strengthened the program.

MONITORING AND SUPPORTING PROGRAM STAFF

Leaders of the Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs monitor and support staff to ensure that the programs are implemented consistently over a wide service area. They also play a role in enhancing program quality by helping staff members access information or training they may need to build their skills and do their jobs well. Program leaders offer such support directly and encourage staff members to help each other.

- ***Case note reviews and other monitoring tools help managers stay aware of staff activities.***

BNF and Future Steps program administrators use case note reviews to keep informed about the services their staff members provide. BNF educators are required to document the content of teaching sessions and any other client meetings, as well as their contacts with other service providers. These notes are then sent electronically to the program coordinator. The coordinator regularly selects several teaching records to review, largely at random, and gives feedback to educators based on these reports. Comments from the coordinator might include suggested teaching strategies for difficult subjects or ways to address larger client issues while maintaining an educational focus. Case notes can also give the coordinator an idea of how extensively educators are working with other service providers. The Future Steps program coordinator reviewed case notes with similar objectives in mind—ensuring

that staff members provided appropriate services and documented them completely. Particular emphasis was placed on reviewing case notes of less experienced workers who needed extra support in their day-to-day work.

Key indicators of First Wheels activity—such as the number of applications received or approved, cars placed, and loan payments collected—give the program director basic information on the results of staff activity in each service area. These data allow the director to make comparisons across service areas and assess the overall workload of individual staff members. When workloads have seemed out of balance, the program director has occasionally reallocated cases among program managers working in adjacent service areas to create a more even distribution. Assessments of individual workloads take into account the special responsibilities of some program managers. For example, one manager is the program's liaison with the state surplus vehicle supplier, and another has taken a lead role in creating a manual to document the program's procedures.

Another form of program and staff assessment relies on customized monitoring tools. Both Future Steps and BNF incorporated the management information systems developed for each program into their monitoring activities. This step may have been natural for the programs, since each MIS was based on the program's existing approach to record keeping and was created with the input of program staff. BNF designers also have created program-specific assessment tools to track improvements in clients' ability to manage their lives. These instruments are intended to measure incremental changes in soft skills that normally are difficult to discern. Success markers and an entry/exit checklist itemize the attitudes and skills that BNF seeks to encourage and measure participants' progress toward developing them, from month to month and over the course of their participation in the program (see text box). In addition to assessing changes in participants' skill levels, these tools help educators focus on an explicit set of program goals.

- ***Managers support remote staff through regular communication and team meetings. They also encourage staff interaction to create a sense of program cohesion.***

In all the programs, e-mail and telephone communication occurs regularly between the program administrator and staff and is a primary way that managers offer support. Regular communication allows program administrators to provide ongoing guidance and technical assistance to staff members—particularly those who administrators feel could improve their work or deliver services more effectively. Staff also reported communicating with one another on a regular basis, to raise questions on program policy, share effective service delivery strategies, or offer one another encouragement. To encourage this kind of communication, the BNF program coordinator has established an e-mail bulletin board for educators. The coordinator also is attempting to create informal mentoring relationships between staff members, matching more experienced educators with those who could benefit from additional guidance.

First Wheels and BNF program administrators also use formal performance evaluations to communicate with staff members. Annual reviews for First Wheels program managers

PROGRAM-MONITORING TOOLS IN BUILDING NEBRASKA FAMILIES: ENTRY-EXIT CHECKLISTS AND SUCCESS MARKERS

BNF uses two customized tools—entry-exit checklists and success markers—to monitor program operations and track changes in clients’ ability to manage their lives. Entry-exit checklists document pre-post changes in clients’ behaviors and attitudes, and success markers provide a monthly indicator of clients’ progress toward meeting predetermined goals.

The entry-exit checklist helps educators understand participants’ strengths and weaknesses and provides a point of comparison for assessing changes in clients’ lives. The checklist asks participants for responses to 20 statements that reflect life skills and personal behaviors and attitudes. Using a five-point scale, participants indicate how often they do or feel what the statements indicate—for example, “I feel positive about my life,” “I keep a record of how I spend my money,” or “I miss work or appointments.” Participants complete the same checklist when they exit the program. Although administrators recognize the limitations of self-reported information, the checklist is useful for characterizing participants’ progress during their time in the program.

Success markers convey program expectations and track participants’ monthly progress toward meeting goals. The markers are divided into three tiers, corresponding to the perceived likelihood and difficulty of achieving them: (1) basic tasks the program “expects to see,” such as attending appointments and being prepared for lessons; (2) higher-level activities the program would “like to see,” such as setting short-term goals and practicing new skills; and (3) accomplishments the program would “love to see,” such as maintaining employment and serving as a volunteer or mentor for others.

Each month, educators use a four-point scale to indicate how frequently participants show each behavior. Some bias is inevitable, since educators not only provide instruction and support to clients, but also rate their improvement. However, success markers have allowed administrators and educators to examine clients’ progress against program goals and compare client groups, such as those who graduate from the program and those who drop out.

focus on their knowledge of program policy, workload management, and ability to advocate for the program and participants. BNF educators are evaluated by UNCE district directors, their official supervisors, with input from the BNF program coordinator. Unlike in First Wheels and BNF, Future Steps staff did not receive formal evaluations. The SCC placement center director and Future Steps program coordinator observed and discussed each worker’s performance, but they did not provide structured feedback to the staff in an annual review.

Regular staff meetings help promote a supportive work environment. Staff members value these gatherings as opportunities to share information, discuss job-related challenges, create a sense of program cohesion, and foster ongoing commitment to the program’s mission. The First Wheels program director holds in-person quarterly staff meetings to

address ongoing operational issues and review policy changes. BNF staff members attend two-day meetings about every three months. These meetings include in-service trainings on such topics as new curriculum modules, welfare agency policies, and how to handle difficult client issues like partner abuse. Future Steps administrators convened occasional staff meetings, but scheduling problems prevented them from doing so regularly. A more typical form of support for career specialists was direct contact with Future Steps program leaders whenever questions arose, sometimes several times in a single day.

CHAPTER V

LESSONS ON IMPLEMENTING RURAL WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

Successful implementation of rural welfare-to-work programs requires that program designers and staff take into account conditions specific to rural places: the smaller number of good jobs and social service providers than in urban areas, a geographically dispersed client population, and tight-knit local communities. The experiences of the three Rural Welfare-to-Work demonstration programs offer several lessons on how to promote effective implementation in this context.

- *Welfare-to-work programs may be most valuable for rural clients when they both focus on improving employment prospects and provide assistance on a range of other issues.*

By design, the three programs aim to enhance, directly or indirectly, clients' ability to secure and maintain employment. Future Steps helped clients identify and pursue available employment opportunities; BNF extends basic life skills education to clients with multiple personal and family barriers so they can begin to look for work; and First Wheels provides access to affordable, personal transportation, enabling clients to travel to work and manage family responsibilities, often over long distances.

The programs' potential value to rural clients surfaces not only through these basic design elements but also in how services are delivered. Although each program has an area of specialization, staff members often address a wide variety of issues—personal and logistical—as they help clients. Future Steps career specialists provided clients with job leads, but they also offered advice on such issues as family relationships and housing. First Wheels helps clients acquire cars and, through its application process, gives them experience creating a household budget.

In addition, relatively small caseloads help staff members respond to the diverse needs of individual clients. This wide-ranging, individualized service delivery may be especially important in rural places where fewer service providers exist. Without other sources of assistance, clients appear more likely turn to staff of the demonstration programs for many kinds of help.

- ***Program staff can address rural challenges related to clients' poor personal reputations by vouching for them with potential employers and other service providers.***

As staff of the demonstration programs help clients identify, and take advantage of, available job opportunities and services, they also serve as a personal reference. This backing has special value in tight-knit rural communities, where a poor personal or family reputation can negatively affect a person's economic prospects. Such support may make employers more comfortable offering program clients a job. It can also facilitate clients' interaction with welfare agencies and other social service providers. In addition, the encouragement of program staff can give clients the confidence they need to continue pursuing employment and other goals.

- ***Partner organizations in the demonstration programs offer advantages—location and reputation—that have particular significance in rural areas.***

In general, welfare-to-work programs benefit from partnerships between welfare agencies and outside organizations, which can offer resources and expertise that enhance the services normally available to low-income families. In the case of the demonstration programs, institutional partners offer capabilities related to workforce and career services, educational outreach, and rural community development. As program staff members work with clients, they can use such institutional resources as career development tools or specialized curricula.

Institutional partners in the demonstration programs bring two advantages particularly important in rural places—an established presence and positive reputation in their communities. For example, UNCE has decades of experience delivering education to families living in sparsely populated rural areas. The partners' physical presence and history of working in rural communities enhance efforts to conduct outreach and provide welfare-to-work services to low-income families in these areas. As locally recognized institutions, their involvement may also help generate local support for a program from employers, service providers, and others. Moreover, the organizations' high standing lessens the strong stigma often attached to welfare programs in rural areas. This is especially true for partners that are educational institutions.

- ***Outreach must be aggressive to reach potential clients in rural places. Clear incentives and strong coordination between a welfare agency and its partner organization promote successful recruitment.***

Rural welfare-to-work programs face a significant challenge in recruiting clients from a dispersed population of potentially eligible people. Without active, coordinated efforts to identify eligible clients, inform them about the program, and encourage them to participate, programs may experience lower than expected rates of enrollment.

Incentives for both the welfare agency and its institutional partner strengthen outreach efforts. For welfare agency caseworkers, a clear understanding that the welfare-to-work

program will help clients accomplish key goals is an important factor in deciding to make a referral. In Illinois, for example, Future Steps services, which focused on job search and placement, were plainly linked to the welfare agency's work-centered TANF program. The referral process must also be simple enough, or organized well enough, that it does not seem burdensome. Linking compensation for services to enrollment levels appears to be an effective incentive for partner organizations to actively pursue referrals. Such incentives appear to encourage BNF staff members to devote special attention to communicating with administrators and caseworkers at the welfare agency and ensuring that eligible clients know about the program.

Outreach to rural clients seems most successful when both the welfare agency and its partner organization participate, but expectations for how each entity will participate in this process should be clearly defined. If roles and responsibilities are ambiguous, or if there is insufficient communication between agency and partner staff, important outreach tasks may be deferred or left undone.

- ***Operating programs in large, sparsely populated service areas requires independent staff members familiar with their communities. Program leaders must be prepared to actively support staff members and monitor their work from a distance.***

The context of rural welfare-to-work programs influences the skills and qualifications necessary for program staff. Staff members of these programs must be able to independently manage their day-to-day activities and tap into local resources. Some degree of autonomy may be desirable for program staff in any location. However, rural welfare-to-work staff members are more likely to be posted far from their supervisors and have large service areas to cover, so self-motivation is essential for them. Familiarity with local communities enables staff to find outside resources that may benefit clients and to interact easily with employers or other agencies on clients' behalf.

With staff posted far from their supervisors, program managers must find ways to support staff and monitor their activities from a distance. Active managerial support is critical for improving staff skills, building morale, and creating a sense of professional community among staff members who work far from each other. Frequent communication between program managers and staff is a central element of this support. In all three demonstration programs, managers regularly respond by e-mail or telephone to questions on program policy from field staff or suggest how to address a specific client's needs or circumstances. Managers also promote interaction among staff members, through group meetings and ongoing communication, so they will share advice and encourage each other.

Formal monitoring tools facilitate the management of rural welfare-to-work programs and ensure that the programs are implemented consistently across large service areas. These tools may include information systems that track key program indicators, such as the management information systems used by all three demonstration programs. Reviews of case notes give program leaders detailed information on the services that line staff in distant locations are delivering to specific clients. Performance measurement instruments, like

BNF's success markers, also can give program leaders some insight on client experiences and outcomes. These strategies and tools provide leaders of rural welfare-to-work programs the information they need to manage program implementation across large, diverse areas.

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APPENDIX A
PROGRAM PROFILES

ILLINOIS FUTURE STEPS

OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Future Steps aimed to help low-income people in southern Illinois become employed and improve their employment circumstances through intensive case management and job placement assistance. Its program model featured a set of core services, including (1) an initial assessment of skills and interests; (2) individualized job search and skills enhancement plans; (3) help overcoming personal and logistical barriers to employment through outside referrals, supportive service payments, and mentoring; (4) postemployment support; and (5) vocational training tailored to local employers' needs.

Future Steps operated from July 2001 through June 2003, enrolling TANF clients who were required to work and low-income people who volunteered to participate. The program enrolled 313 clients during the demonstration period, about one-quarter of whom were on TANF.

SERVICE DELIVERY

After Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) caseworkers referred a client to Future Steps, career specialists used a standardized career assessment tool and skills/barriers checklists to gather details about the client's employment history and job skills and begin identifying potential barriers to employment. Future Steps staff helped clients search for jobs by specifying tasks that would lead to employment (such as completing a resume and submitting applications), monitoring their progress in completing these tasks, sharing information about available jobs, and contacting potential employers on clients' behalf.

To address employment barriers, Future Steps staff counseled clients on job-related and personal issues and referred them to local providers of training, health care, child care, and other services. Staff also drew on flexible supportive service funds—up to \$500 per client—to help clients meet a variety of employment-related and personal expenses, including transportation, job-related equipment and clothing, and housing and utilities bills.

After a client found a job, the Future Steps career specialist provided postemployment support by following up with the employer and helping resolve any issues that arose for clients on the job. Clients generally received regular support until they reached 90 days of employment. After this, they could access Future Steps services as needed.

ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS

Future Steps developed through a collaboration between the career services center of Shawnee Community College (SCC) and IDHS. Responsibility for day-to-day administration of the program rested with the community college; IDHS funded Future Steps and referred clients to the program. The Future Steps staff included the director of community and career services at SCC, a program coordinator, and several career specialists, who worked directly with clients. Future Steps career specialists were stationed in local IDHS offices.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Geography and Economy. Five counties in southern Illinois—Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union—made up the Future Steps service area. The area has a population of 63,720, according to the 2000 Census, and is almost entirely rural. More than four-fifths of its residents are white; African Americans (about 13 percent of residents) represent the second-largest racial group. All five counties face economic challenges, including poverty rates above the statewide average (as high as 26 percent in Alexander County) and scarce employment opportunities. The area has a few large employers, including chemical and cement factories, state prisons, and a riverboat casino.

Welfare Policy. Illinois places a high priority on welfare clients' rapid attachment to work. People not covered under the state TANF program's few exemptions must engage in work activities for 30 hours a week (35 hours for two-parent households). At caseworkers' discretion, a small number of clients may participate in education and training to meet part of their work requirement, but these are generally considered secondary activities. The state's TANF policies also provide positive incentives for paid employment in the form of a generous earned income disregard and transitional eligibility for Medicaid and child care.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES

- ***Future Steps appeared to offer substantially more individualized support than would be available to clients otherwise.*** Because IDHS caseworkers carried large caseloads (usually between 200 and 400 cases), their ability to provide personal assistance to clients was constrained. In contrast, Future Steps staff members carried small caseloads (approximately 15 to 35 clients), for whom they could provide tailored job search support and mentoring.
- ***A strong collaboration between SCC and IDHS, including the co-location of Future Steps and IDHS staff, helped smooth the startup and operation of the program.*** Administrators at SCC and IDHS perceived the partnership between the two organizations to be strong. The two organizations had collaborated previously on a precursor to Future Steps, the Advancing Opportunities program. Regional and local IDHS administrators provided input on Future Steps' design, which helped garner strong support for the program. Co-location of Future Steps and IDHS staff help promote referrals to

the program and facilitated ongoing communication between Future Steps career specialists and IDHS caseworkers and administrators.

- ***Staff turnover created challenges for the program in its second year, and one of the program's planned services—employer-focused job training—did not materialize.*** Several staff members—including the SCC career services director, the program coordinator, and some career specialists—left Future Steps over the course of the program. Some of these positions were left unfilled. Because of the small size of the Future Steps staff, this turnover led to short-term breaks or slowdowns in service delivery. Future Steps did not offer employer-focused vocational training, apparently due to fiscal pressures within SCC, difficulty partnering with the local workforce development organization, and the strict work requirement facing many clients, which limited their education and training options.
- ***Many Future Steps clients appeared to enter employment.*** According to data from the Future Steps management information system, about two-thirds of clients became employed at least once after entering the program. More than 40 percent of these clients were employed at least three months. Job turnover was common, however; of employed clients, nearly 3 in 10 became employed three times or more during the six-month period following their enrollment into Future Steps..

BUILDING NEBRASKA FAMILIES

OVERVIEW

Building Nebraska Families (BNF) is an intensive preemployment, educational program for TANF clients in rural areas who face serious personal and family barriers and skill deficiencies. The program targets hard-to-employ clients and aims to help them develop the basic skills necessary to engage in employment activities. BNF educators, who are master's-level professionals, work closely with participants, using research-based curricula to teach such life skills topics as self-esteem, healthy relationships, parenting, goal setting, problem solving, money management, and communication skills.

BNF began enrolling evaluation sample members in March 2002 and will continue doing so through August 2004. The program expects to serve 330 clients during this period.

SERVICE DELIVERY

BNF educators and clients work together to identify clients' personal goals and create an individualized education and support plan to meet those goals. Educators then meet with clients about once a week, usually in clients' homes, for lessons on life skills and family resource management.

As they work with participants, educators make referrals to other service agencies as needed, including mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, community action agencies, and parenting groups. Educators also provide mentoring and personalized assistance related to practical and personal issues. For example, they may coach clients on making a difficult telephone call to a child's school or on getting help to resolve legal problems.

Educators use "success markers" to monitor participants' progress. The success markers specify behaviors the program seeks to encourage and allow educators to rate how often participants demonstrate the behaviors. Participants complete their BNF educational plans by meeting established goals that demonstrate improvement in life skills, such as exiting TANF, gaining employment, or achieving stability in their lives. When participants are employed or off TANF, educators provide regular, but less frequent, follow-up support, as needed, for up to six months.

ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS

BNF is operated by the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension (UNCE) under contract to the Nebraska Health and Human Services System (NHHS). Because NHHS has collaborated with UNCE in the past, it has been easy for these agencies to partner in this program. NHHS provides funding and referrals to BNF and appoints representatives from NHHS service areas to the statewide BNF advisory committee. Local NHHS offices identify and refer appropriate TANF clients to the BNF program and monitor their progress. Responsibility for day-to-day administration of the program rests with the BNF program coordinator, who provides guidance to the extension educators who work with participants across the service areas.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Geography and Economy. The BNF program operates in rural areas across Nebraska, covering more than half of the state's counties. Individual BNF service areas usually encompass three to six counties. Almost half of Nebraska's 1.7 million people live in rural places, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. These areas are largely homogeneous in racial and ethnic composition; nearly all residents are white. However, some rural communities have experienced a recent influx of refugees, other immigrants, and migrant workers. Entry-level jobs for low-skilled workers in rural areas commonly include jobs at local nursing homes and assisted-care facilities, clerical and administrative support positions, assembly line work at local factories, and housekeeping, food service, and other service work.

Welfare Policy. Nebraska's TANF program, Employment First, uses a flexible, human capital investment approach to help clients develop the skills to transition to work within a two-year period. Participation in employment-related activities for 30 hours a week is mandatory for non-exempt TANF clients, including BNF participants. While many clients who are job ready are encouraged to enter the job market quickly, the program also provides support for short-term education and vocational training. Across the state, contractors to HHSS provide employment services, such as job search assistance, to TANF clients. Although Nebraska's welfare caseload has declined less than the national average, the fraction of Nebraska's TANF clients who work or participate in work activities is higher than in many states.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES

- ***BNF offers much more individual support to clients, primarily through its focus on life skills education, than is available otherwise.*** The BNF program coordinator requires educators to structure their work with participants around educational activities. Educators provide substantial noneducational support (such as referrals and contacts with other service providers). However, they are encouraged to frame their advice and assistance to clients in educational terms—teaching clients how to solve problems or overcome obstacles

themselves, rather than doing it for them. Small caseloads of 10 to 20 allow educators to individualize their services.

- ***BNF has maintained substantial stability in staffing and leadership.*** There has been limited turnover among BNF staff. All BNF educators are master's-level professionals with previous work experience. Most educators have stayed with the BNF program for a year or more, and the program coordinator has been with BNF since its inception. This stability has facilitated staff development and consistency in service delivery.
- ***To boost recruitment, BNF and HHSS have worked together to market the program as a positive opportunity.*** While the personal nature of BNF and its focus on home visits makes some clients reluctant to get involved, enrollment in BNF has been relatively steady. BNF educators attempt to demonstrate the benefits of the program by periodically conducting short, one-time, life skills sessions open to all TANF clients. Contractual incentives also help with client recruitment: HHSS compensates UNCE on a case-rate basis, paying a fixed amount per BNF client per month.
- ***Most referred clients meet regularly with educators, but some clients are difficult to engage or exit the program after only a short time.*** Most BNF clients meet regularly and often with educators. BNF staff members report, however, that as many as one-third of referred clients are marginally, or not at all, involved in the program, despite educators' attempts to make home visits or contacts. Some clients are initially engaged but then stop participating because they lose interest or move. Educators eventually drop nonparticipating clients from the program. Clients in the evaluation sample have participated for an average of 5 months; records since the program's inception indicate that some clients stay in the program for 18 months or longer.
- ***Many BNF clients appear to enter employment.*** According to program data covering March 2002 through February 2003, of clients who have been in the program three months or more, about 45 percent have been able to maintain employment most of the time for at least one month, and more than a quarter have done so for at least three months (although these months may not be continuous).

TENNESSEE FIRST WHEELS

OVERVIEW

The First Wheels program provides interest-free car loans to low-income families who need transportation to get to work and improve their quality of life. To be eligible to apply for a loan, a person must be employed and a current or former client of Families First, Tennessee's TANF program, or a recipient of food stamps or child care assistance. Applicants approved for a loan gain access to a supply of reliable used cars and receive assistance securing related services such as car insurance and repair. In addition, First Wheels offers families an opportunity to gain experience managing household finances. It also encourages accountability by requiring clients to make regular loan payments and maintain their cars.

The First Wheels program will participate in only the process study component of the Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation. Due to limited enrollment, it will not be possible to complete impact and cost-benefit studies of the program.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) caseworkers help recruit clients for the First Wheels program, then initiate their application process. Applicants must have a clean driving record, take financial management training, view a video on car maintenance, and prepare a personal budget demonstrating their ability to make loan payments. Applications that meet all requirements are forwarded to a local loan committee, made up of community volunteers and a THDS administrator, that makes a final decision regarding the loan. To set a reasonable repayment schedule for clients, most loans are approved for a term of 30 to 36 months and an amount of \$2,400 to \$3,100.

After the loan is approved, First Wheels program managers help clients acquire vehicles and monitor loan payments and vehicle maintenance. The program managers also use a network of community partners, including car suppliers, insurers, and mechanics, to help clients access goods and services they may need at an affordable price. Once customers make all of the installment payments on their loans, First Wheels transfers full ownership of their vehicles to them.

ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS

TDHS and the Tennessee Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D) operate the First Wheels program together; it is the first time these two agencies are joining in a statewide collaboration. TDHS provides funding, makes referrals, and coordinates the loan application process, while RC&D purchases vehicles and manages individual loans under a contract with TDHS. The program staff includes a director who oversees day-to-day program operations and four to six program managers who provide services in territories of 10 to 20 counties each.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Geography and Economy. The TDHS districts included in the First Wheels demonstration evaluation cover the entire state of Tennessee, except for four urban counties (Davidson, Hamilton, Knox, and Shelby). The 91 counties in the evaluation area are home to about 2.2 million people, about two-fifths of the state's population. Economic conditions in rural Tennessee are generally worse than in the state as a whole. In February 2003, 14 of the 15 nonmetropolitan areas had unemployment rates higher than the statewide average: 5.6 to 10.1 percent, compared with 5.1 percent. Poverty in rural parts of Tennessee also tends to be higher—13.5 percent of the statewide population lived in poverty in 1999, but 15.4 of the nonmetropolitan population lived in poverty at the same time.

Welfare Policy. Families First, Tennessee's TANF program, aims to strengthen families, improve the state's workforce, and reduce poverty and welfare dependence. Families First clients must complete a personal responsibility plan and participate in work activities for 40 hours a week. These activities may include full- or part-time employment, job search, community service, GED, or postsecondary training or education directly related to employment. About two-fifths of the state's TANF caseload lives in rural parts of the state. Unlike many other states, Tennessee designates transportation as an entitlement for TANF recipients, and periods in which a client cannot access transportation in order to meet TANF-related obligations do not count toward cash assistance time limits.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES

- ***First Wheels program managers focus on addressing clients' individual transportation needs, holding them accountable for meeting loan obligations, and providing ongoing support for car ownership.*** Program managers prioritize matching a client's personal and financial situation with a suitable vehicle, to increase the chances that the client will fulfill repayment obligations. Program managers appear firm in their approach to collecting loan payments, but they do make some accommodations for difficult circumstances in clients' lives. Vehicle repossession is considered a last resort, and the program's repossession rate is relatively low, about nine percent. The First Wheels program has placed approximately 400 vehicles with clients from its inception in March 2000 through June 2003. Clients have paid off about 14 percent of these vehicle loans so far.

- ***Outreach to potential clients has been a major challenge for First Wheels.*** First Wheels has served many fewer clients than expected in rural areas. Several factors have contributed to this result. First, state and regional administrators have not consistently and vigorously promoted First Wheels to local offices, which may have led local staff to overlook the program in the face of competing priorities and high workloads. Outreach also has been hampered by an unclear division of responsibility between TDHS and RC&D. Another factor inhibiting outreach is the perception among some local staff that the First Wheels application process is onerous because it involves several steps and requires that applicants prepare a household budget. Finally, the program's relatively demanding eligibility criteria, which included two months of employment for most clients, may have amplified the sentiment among staff that suitable clients are difficult to identify.
- ***The First Wheels program has been successful in acquiring reliable and affordable vehicles for clients.*** The program has secured privileged access to used state vehicles through an agreement with the state of Tennessee. These vehicles are generally in better condition and more affordable than those on the open market. First Wheels program staff throughout the state are able to select from this pool of state vehicles for their clients.
- ***Plans to help First Wheels clients improve their credit records were not realized.*** The First Wheels program had planned to report the payment histories of successful clients to credit bureaus in order to help clients establish a positive credit record. Credit bureaus charge substantial fees to receive such information, however, and require that it be sent in a specialized format. First Wheels administrators chose not to undertake this task because of the financial and logistical demands it would place on the program.